



SOCIO CULTURAL PROFILE DONGRIA KANDHA TRIBE OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

The Dongria Kandha, a section of the Kandha tribe of Odisha, live on the top of the Niyamgiris, a rugged mass of hill ranges situated on the borders of Rayagada and Gunupur sub-division of Rayagada district. In the case of the Dongria village the traditional panchayat is still effective and runs along democratic principles as before and serves the people well in the matters of maintaining social control and enforcing social sanctions. Every Dongria village had and still continues to have its own traditional council as part of the political organization. Considering the levels of economic development the Kandha tribe of Odisha are divided into several sub-sections such as- Kutia Kandha, Dongria Kandha, Jharia Kandha and Desia Kandha. Dongria section of the Kandha community. They are found in the Niyamgiri hill ranges, which comprise 3 Community Development blocks namely: Bissamcuttack, Kalyansingpur, Muniguda of Rayagada and Gunupur sub-division of Rayagada district.

KEYWORDS: Tribe, Odisha, Dongria Kandha, Culture, Society

INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic account of the Dongrias which finds place in this section relates to such village as Kurli, Hundijali, Khambesi, Khajuri, Mundabali, Kadragumma, Batigumma, Uppergumma and Radang of Bissamcuttack Block, Bondeli and tanda of Kalyansingpur Block.

The Dongrias stand separate from all other sections for their skill in horticulture. They inhabit the Niyamgiri hills of Rayagada sub-division of Rayagada district and grow pineapple in vast stretches of land in the hill slopes. These pineapples are planted in places where the jackfruit trees are present, so that the leaves of the trees provide shade to the pineapple plants. Dongrias are also skill in banana plantation. Side by side the Dongria on shifting cultivation in hill-slope at a higher altitude close to the hill-top. The same rotational method as found among the neighbouring Saoras is followed in the cultivation of the clearings technically known as swidden, but rotational cycle which is on an average five or six years in Southern Odisha is longer by one or two years among the Dongrias because of thicker forest cover in the Niyamgiri hills than elsewhere. It is interesting to note that the Dongria depend upon both primitive and advanced means of livelihood. The shifting cultivation represents the prior stage of economic development where as the horticultural plantation a higher stage of development. One reason which possibly explains coexistence of primitive and advanced practices of livelihood is that the shifting cultivation provides the Dongrias with minor millets, pulses and cereals on which they subsist where as the fruits of horticulture give them ready cash with which they meet their other requirements such as clothes, ornaments and utensils. The dress and the ornaments which adorn Dongrias particularly their male members distinguish them from other sections of the tribe. In general a Dongria male puts on a narrow scarf wrapped around

the waist and adorns his body with ornaments of various types. He shaves his head keeping a tuft of hair nearly tied to a knot at the back. Sometimes a leaf-rolled cigar is seen tucked in the hair-knot at the back and invariably every Dongria male carries an axe in his shoulder and a knife is kept hanging from his waist-belt.

Beside these peculiarities in dress and adornment the installation of Darani- Penu and her consort called, Katiasal in the center of the village street is a typical feature of Dongria settlement. The maidens' dormitory which is invariably present in each Dongria settlement is another typical feature which adds to the specialties of Dongria social structure and culture.

Every Dongria village had and still continues to have its own traditional council as part of the political organization. With the abolition of the feudal system in Odisha the mutha system of administration. In the case of the Dongria village the traditional panchayat is still effective and runs along democratic principles as before and serves the people well in the matters of maintaining social control and enforcing social sanctions. The alien political structure, like statutory gram panchayat which Dongrias do not understand and do not feel it as theirs appear to be an unnecessary superimposition having no stake in Dongria political system. Dongrias have landed in the inaccessible areas of Niyamgiri hill ranges not by their own choice but by being pushed into these areas by advanced non-tribal communities. Not until the end of the second half of the twentieth century Dongrias did not come in direct contact with either administrators or social reformers or academicians. The villages of the Dongria Kandha are located in a tangle of thickly wooded hill ranges. The earliest ones are situated in the valleys and the later ones either in the hill-slopes or at the hill top. The suitability of a site for habitation is determined by

the availability of sufficient land for shifting cultivation and a perennial source of water supply. A village comprises in the minimum two separate wards, one inhabited by the Dongria Kandha and the other by the Domb. The houses are built close to each other conforming to a linear pattern. A narrow street runs from one end to the other of the village separating the two rows of houses.

When population increases in the village, some move out and build new houses in the proximity. Generally the house of a Dongria Kandha is rectangular in ground plan. Earth is removed from the site on which the house is to be built. The floor of the house is made up of earth being rammed uniformly to make it leveled all over. The clothes which the Dongria Kandha wear are very simple and scanty. A man wears a cloth called, Kodi, of 16 feet in length and one foot in width. It is wrapped round the waist several times and then passed between the thighs, so that one end hangs in front and the other at the back. The front end is decorated with coloured threads and embroidery work. The Dongria Kandha, both males and females, including children, are fond of ornaments which they adorn themselves ordinarily and look attractive. It really becomes difficult to differentiate the sex from a long distance when both the sexes put on ornaments. Because, the Dongria males grow long hair as proverbially required by the mythical Niyam Rajato differentiate themselves from other sections of the Kandha and prepare braided locks like the females at their scalps. It is a fact that they cannot afford to put on golden ornaments, but usually ornaments made out of silver, brass, and alloys are used.

A wooden comb (Kokuya) is fixed at the hair knot irrespective of sex which adorns the hair-lock and keeps the hair tight. The land in the Dongria region is divided into three categories—hill slopes or top of hills are called, Hani; land at the foot of hills, called, Penga; and lands adjoining the hamlets are called Bada (Kitchen garden). In view of the terrain, the Dongrias mostly possess Haru-type of land rather than other varieties of land which are very scarce. Again, of all varieties, Penga type of land is considered to be the best variety as regards fertility as it contains black soil (Birga). Some well-to-do families raise hill-paddy on this type of land. The Dongrias grow various crops mainly for their food as well as to earn cash to meet other expenditures. Kosla, Mandia, Arka, Jana, Ganthia and Jhudang are the crops for their consumption whereas Baila, Castor-seeds, Roots, Fruits, Turmeric, Ginger and Arrow-root are mainly cash crops in the Dongria society. Dongar paddy, if produced, is kept reserved for obtaining essential commodities like tobacco, cloth, dry fish, earthen pots and baskets through barter. The economic life of the Dongrias of the Niyamgiri hills hinges almost exclusively on fruit growing vast stretches of land in the hill slope. Right from valley bottom to the hill top, the area is covered with plantations of jackfruit, citrus, banana and pineapple etc. The Dongria Kandha continue to maintain their traditional interest in wild fruits, tubers and nuts although in recent times there has been a steady diminution of various forest produce owing to large scale deforestation due to the practice of shifting cultivation. The Dongria Kandha claim royal ancestry. Individually they feel proud of their royal origin, and that in fact guides them not to work for others,

mostly outsiders, as paid labour. The Dongrias are basically swidden cultivators. They grow crops in the hill slopes with the help of very small-scale technology. For swidden cultivation they need more number of working hands. Family provides the labour to the labour cooperative and it constitutes the smallest unit of labour cooperative. A woman in the Dongria society is considered an economic asset and therefore, polygynous families, though numerically insignificant are not altogether uncommon. The family is not only a social unit but also an economic unit. All the able-bodied adult members and even the children above 8 years of age toil in the field and contribute to the common economic pool of the family. Men do the hardest part of economic activities, such as ploughing and cutting trees and women do the cleaning of thorns and thickets in the fields, particularly in the hill slopes and make the field fit for growing crops. The men make holes in the fields and the women who follow them dibble seeds into them. The whole life of the Dongria Kandha—economic, social and political—is pervaded by their religion. Their religion consists of regular propitiation of gods, spirits and manes and performance of rituals. Propitiation is done through appropriate rites and sacrifices, charms and spells. They always remain submissive and dutiful to the supernatural entities, but invariably entertain some misgivings and mistrust towards the malevolent spirits.

Life in a Dongria Kandha family is most peaceful and without conflict and tension. Among the Dongrias marriage negotiations start at an early age. Parents settle marriage of their children by receiving bride-price and accepting liquor from each other of the concerned parties. In this case a particular girl already engaged with a particular boy from the very early hood. Among the Dongria Kandha the older people are highly respected by the younger people. Dongria Kandha is characterized by an absence of economic stratification, although economic grades among them are present. Absence of a well-defined division of labour in primitive society does not favour hereditary skill development leading to the formation of artisan classes or guilds. For them spontaneous co-operation in domestic and economic life becomes essential. It is through this composite and organic social life as well as through the process of socialization an individual learns socially prescribed modes of behaviour and accordingly internalizes the existing norms and mores of the society.

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